Playing for the Breaks: Insurgent Mistakes

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Insurgent leaders commit strategic mistakes that can significantly retard their efforts, and if properly leveraged by counterinsurgent forces, may lead to the insurgents' defeat. Despite the pivotal role these mistakes play in the trajectory of internal conflicts, they have been afforded little attention in academic and practitioner literature. This article seeks to fill that void by establishing a typology of insurgent strategic errors, outlining a framework for understanding when certain mistakes are made, and offering a brief case study to help illustrate the typology and timing framework.

In a 1989 interview, the iconic counterinsurgent Robert Thompson outlined an optimum, three-part counterinsurgency strategy consisting of emplacing programs to address the root causes of an insurgency, ensuring the programs are sustainable, and "playing for the breaks."[1] Breaks, according to Thompson, entail changes in the situation on the international, national, and local levels, and these changes—especially those at the national and local levels—are often generated by critical errors made by an insurgency's leaders.[2]

An insurgency is a risky and highly complex human activity susceptible to a range of mistakes by its protagonists. It is safe to say there has never been a mistake-free insurgency. The defeat of insurgents in Greece in the 1940s, Oman in the 1970s, and Egypt in the 1990s, along with other historical examples, demonstrate the criticality of strategic mistakes on the outcome of internal conflicts. Indeed, the 2007 turnaround in the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq was propelled by insurgent mistakes that were deftly leveraged by US forces.

Despite the pivotal role played by insurgent mistakes in the trajectory of internal conflicts, academics and practitioners tend to concentrate their analyses on the government's role in combating and defeating insurgencies. Oceans of ink have been expended on analyzing errors of counterinsurgents. Yet, virtually no attention has been given in academic and practitioner literature to the incidence and function of insurgent mistakes.

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This article examines the following implications for counterinsurgency strategists with regard to such errors:

- Insurgents make strategic mistakes that may retard their efforts, and if properly leveraged by counterinsurgent forces, may lead to their defeat.

- These mistakes are often made at strategic junctures in a conflict.

- Through an understanding of possible insurgent mistakes and when mistakes manifest themselves, a counterinsurgent force will be better prepared to exploit these errors or weaknesses.

- The role of insurgent mistakes and the criticality of leveraging them requires that the concept be incorporated in doctrinal updates.

A Typology of Insurgent Mistakes

Insurgent strategic mistakes, those that can dramatically retard or doom a movement, come in two basic forms: "original sins" and "situational miscalculations." Original sins are fundamental errors in the initial design of an insurgency. These mistakes, which handicap a movement from its start, include failing to adopt a viable cause, poor selection of operational terrain, restricting mobilization to a narrow ethnic or sectarian group, and adopting a strategy unsuited to goals, terrain, or opponent.[3]

This article, however, is concerned with situational miscalculations. These are mistakes that are made by insurgent leaders during the course of an insurgency and principally involve decisions regarding intermediate objectives and tactics to be employed. Most mistakes in this category have a common root in overreach. Simply put, insurgent leaders overestimate their own capacity with respect to the level of popular support for the movement and the government's capacity and willingness to respond in a forceful and effective manner. These mistakes often stem from impatience or are driven by hubris built from initial success.

Notwithstanding the importance given to insurgent mistakes in this analysis, these errors are normally not sufficient by themselves to result in a reversal of the insurgency. Numerous historical examples suggest that government actions are of equal importance in the impact of errors on the trajectory of an insurgent conflict. A government's failure to take advantage of those errors can establish the conditions for a continued conflict or

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A government's failure to take advantage of those errors can establish the conditions for a continued conflict or insurgent victory.

insurgent victory. Outlined below are ten situational miscalculations commonly made by insurgent leaders.

Imprudent Armed Actions

An insurgent group's initial armed action can create its most dangerous moments. The emerging insurgent organization often lacks internal or external sanctuaries, significant popular support, a developed clandestine infrastructure, a resilient leadership structure, or security practices capable of surviving concerted government action.[4] Consequently, insurgents who misjudge the strength of their movement, the impact of their initial actions, and the government's capacity to respond often result in a government counteraction they are not prepared to withstand.

Such a miscalculation will doom a movement or hamper its growth. For example, it took a decade for radical Islamists in Egypt to overcome the effects of the government's crackdown in the wake of the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat and the accompanying insurrection.[5]

Zealotry

Zealotry entails insurgent organizations imposing, often by force, social customs and mores that are alien to the local populace. Once insurgent-imposed values threaten the social fabric or livelihood of a population, that citizenry may turn against the insurgency, negating efforts to build support or tolerance.[6]

The experience of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) illustrates the reaction and perils of insurgent zealotry. In 1968, the Omani movement reoriented its ideology from a mix of regional separatism and Arab nationalism to Marxism, and moved to impose atheism upon the traditionally Islamic Dhofari populace.[7] They also tried to break the deeply engrained tribalism of the local populace.[8] According to counterinsurgency experts Douglas Blaufarb and George Tanham, "The Muslim tribesmen little understood the Communist jargon and ideas and refused, even under torture, to renounce Allah."[9] In addition to draining popular support for the insurgency, zealotry fractured the movement. Is-

lamic-oriented members of the insurgent organizations staged a revolt that triggered defections and provided a philosophical wedge that the government leveraged to further weaken the movement.[10]

Dysfunctional Terror

The exercise of terror can be a useful tactic for insurgents. Counterinsurgent practitioner and theorist David Galula observed, "Persuasion brings a minority of supporters . . . but force rallies the rest."[11] As the example of the Algerian National Liberation Front showed, the insurgents effectively used terror not only to control broad sectors of the populace, but also to provoke overreaction by the French security forces.[12]

Insurgents, however, often overemphasize the application of terror and violate Galula's dictum of never antagonizing "at any one time more people than can be handled."[13] This dysfunctional terror manifests itself through sustained terror campaigns against a potentially supportive population or through high-profile terror attacks that are so disproportionate that they alienate large segments of the society.

The experience of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) of Algeria provides an example of a sustained campaign of dysfunctional terror. In the mid-1990s, the GIA declared wide swaths of the Algerian populace to be opponents of their radical Islamic revolution.[14] The GIA moved from bombing public facilities and attacking civilian targets to conducting bloody massacres of whole villages in the late 1990s.[15] The massacres caused popular support for the insurgency to wane and triggered schisms among the insurgents.[16] GIA violence led to the rise of civilian vigilantism, organizations and movements the government armed to combat the insurgents.[17] Perhaps, more than any other single factor, the GIA's dysfunctional application of terror led to the insurgents' demise.

The 1997 attack by Egyptian radical Islamists on the Luxor Temple exemplifies the second form of dysfunctional terror: a high-profile attack whose symbolism and brutality alienate the populace at large. The killing of 58 innocents and the threat to the tourism industry outraged the Egyptian public, triggering protests and denial of shelter to the militants. Within a year, several of Egypt's militant groups had suffered schisms and were in irreversible decline.[18]

Both of these examples illustrate the most important consequence of dysfunctional terror: backlash among the populace that initially supported the militants' cause. Ted Robert Gurr observed that this form of response "is even more devastating to the militants than backlash among the larger public. . . . The group finds it increasingly difficult to attract new re-

cruits, to get material resources, to find refuge among reliable sympathizers, or to avoid informants."[19]

Exporting Terror

Conducting terror on foreign soil, if targets and the reaction of the population of the counterinsurgency power are miscalculated, can boomerang on an insurgent movement. For example, Chechen insurgents sought to extend their war beyond the Caucasus into Russia proper, hoping, according to one researcher, "that large-scale terrorist acts in [Russia would] turn public sentiment against the war."[20] Hostage-taking attacks on the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow in 2002 and a school in Beslan in 2004, however, actually boosted Russian popular support for a hard-line approach toward Chechnya.[21] Additionally, the Chechen terrorist actions drew international condemnation and sanctions. For example, the United States, citing the 2002 theater attack, designated several Chechen groups as foreign terrorist organizations.[22]

Overreliance on External Support

Although state support to insurgencies has declined since the end of the Cold War, it still "has a profound impact on the effectiveness" of movements, according to a 2001 RAND study on trends in support to insurgencies.[23] The report highlighted the fact that state support is rendered for *realpolitik* objectives vice any genuine affinity for the insurgency's goals. As such, state support, including provision of sanctuary, can be withdrawn if the policy priorities of the supporting nation change.[24] If an insurgent movement fails to diversify its sources of support—for example, by drawing on diasporas, other nonstate groups, and indigenous sources—it may become vulnerable to any rapid withdrawal of state support. The Kurdish insurgency in Iraq collapsed in 1975 when the Kurds' principal supporter, Iran, reached a diplomatic accommodation with Iraq. Deprived of arms, supplies, and sanctuary, the Kurdish insurgency crumbled within two weeks.[25]

Holding Ground

Defending territory against even a moderately capable counterinsurgency force can lead to military disaster for an insurgency.[26] Insurgents may opt to abandon guerrilla warfare and try to hold ground because of a location's symbolic importance—for example, its status as a "capital" of an ethnic enclave—or because of its utility as a base area or logistics hub.

The experience of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) insurgency of the 1940s illustrates the perils of opting to defend territory while misreading the military situation. In late 1947, the KKE determined that it needed to maintain physical dominance in the Grammos-Visti region in an effort to gain international recognition for its self-declared provisional government. External support from Yugoslavia also passed through this area, and preserving these logistics corridors served as motivation for the KKE to hold the territory.[27] The KKE made its decision to engage in a defensive strategy at a time when the Greek Army was rapidly gaining capability with assistance from the United States.[28] In the judgment of Blaufarb and Tanham, "The KKE condemned its fighters to a hopeless battle against greatly superior forces, foregoing all the advantages that guerillas have in combat with regulars." The movement rapidly lost control of its base areas and eventually the conflict.[29]

Conventional Orientation

Insurgent organizations are sometimes tempted to convert irregular fighters into conventional forces in an attempt to confront government forces on equal terms. If the insurgents misread their capacity, especially their logistics and command and control capabilities, or miscalculate government weakness, they often suffer defeats that reverse years of growth.

In addition to risking military defeat, conventional orientation for an insurgent movement can cause an organization to deemphasize the political aspects of its struggle. Internal documents of the Salvadoran Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) suggest that in this case the insurgents realized, too late, that they had abandoned political mobilization by adopting a conventional strategy and in the process lost popular support.[30] Additionally, the FMLN was expending its supplies and manpower in a vain attempt to maintain a military capability against the rapidly improving Salvadoran Army.[31]

High Stakes Offensive

A major offensive designed to dramatically change the character of a conflict carries great risk for an insurgent movement. Much like a mistimed conventional military operation, insurgencies risk their manpower, logistics, and momentum. In 1972, members of the PFLOAG decided they needed a major military victory to reverse recent counterinsurgency successes. The insurgents launched their attack against the town of Mirbat. The relatively small garrison force held, and almost half of the attacking force was lost. The insurgents not only suffered a military disaster, but also

a major psychological blow, while government morale soared. Although the insurgents hoped that the attack would serve to provide momentum for their cause by turning the populace against the government, the failure only served to accelerate the movement's decline.[32]

The FMLN's 1981 offensive demonstrated that failed campaigns also can cripple mobilization capability required for future endeavors, expose hard-to-build infrastructures, and reveal the lack of popular support for the insurgent movement.[33] The FMLN spent more than four years rebuilding networks that were destroyed when they were exposed during the 1981 offensive.[34]

Security Lapse

A security failure at a critical juncture in a movement's operation can cripple an insurgency, especially if the lapse exposes the organization's infrastructure and leadership. In 1950, the Communist-dominated Hukbalahap (Huk) insurgency in the Philippines suffered when its Manila-based infrastructure was compromised and its files captured.[35] Similarly, in Peru the Shining Path's top leadership and the organization's computer records were seized in a 1992 raid in Lima.[36] These raids weakened the insurgencies and provided the host governments with sufficient time to organize and improve counterinsurgency capabilities.

Both of these examples of security lapses were more than likely the product of overconfidence brought on by the comparative degree of insurgent success. This overconfidence led the insurgents to concentrate key activities and leadership in the capital cities, where government forces and infrastructure are almost always more capable, and to disregard the security practices that contributed to their initial success.[37] Additionally, the Shining Path had become overly centralized at this stage in the insurgency, a condition magnifying the impact of breaches in security.[38]

Enmeshing in Crime

Many, perhaps most, insurgencies develop and leverage criminal activities to help fund an insurgency. The decision to make criminal proceeds a principal means of funding, however, carries significant risks.[39] The greatest danger is that the means—crime—will supplant the ends of the movement and become its *raison d'etre*. Ideology, and more importantly the mobilization of the populace to back the insurgency, may assume secondary importance. Cohesion and discipline also can suffer.

The experience of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) provides an excellent example of the perils of enmeshing a

movement in crime. The FARC leadership opted to tap Colombia's illicit drug trade in 1982 at the same time they decided to deemphasize a political victory in favor of a military one. Over the course of years, the FARC moved from simple taxation and protection of the narco-industry to active involvement in trafficking.[40] Although the money made from illegal narcotics strengthened the FARC militarily, a 2001 RAND analysis noted that the move led to "a loss of ideological cohesion, particularly at the lower levels . . . a loss of domestic and international support . . . and [facilitated] building a coalition of support for the Colombian government."[41] Relying on the criminal industry distanced the FARC from its popular base and removed one of the basic tenets underpinning the organization, reliance on the population for support.

The Timing of Mistakes

In general, insurgencies that survive their "birth"—their appearance as an armed challenger—and possess a degree of competence often experience a period of growth as a counterinsurgency power fails to accurately identify the threat or struggles to develop an adequate response. Even if an organization experiences this period of initial survival, critical errors and original sins can force a movement into an early decline. If an insurgency enjoys initial successes while the government simultaneously mounts a credible response, the conflict may reach a "dynamic" plateau. As the median duration of insurgencies is ten years, that dynamic plateau can last a number of years.[42] The slope of the plateau will often vary over time, marginally favoring one side or another. Exhaustion and mistakes by either side can push the conflict toward resolution, either through de facto battlefield decision or negotiation.[43]

The movement between stages—or simply acceleration or deceleration of an insurgency—is frequently the product of specific decisions by the insurgency's leadership, often made in reaction to insurgent strengths, weaknesses, or a desire to resolve a relative stalemate. These strategic junctures are often marked by a transition from one set of tactics and objectives to another. It is at these strategic junctures that situational miscalculations often occur.

Insurgencies by their very nature are fractious affairs, and the stress and discord generated by decisions at strategic junctures can bring to the fore internal disagreements or variances over the direction that the insurgency is moving. Disunity can produce or exacerbate these situational miscalculations as insurgent leaders work to outmaneuver rivals or advance personal and ideological agendas. Strategic junctures and the accompany-

ing mistakes are often also triggered by events beyond the insurgency's ability to control, such as changes in the government's leadership, or by changes in the international environment, especially those affecting foreign supporters of the insurgency or government.

Many of the situational miscalculations previously described appear, based on limited case study analysis, to cluster at common strategic junctures directly linked to various stages of the insurgency's development. Of course, each insurgency develops in its own unique manner, causing the manifestation of insurgent mistakes to vary accordingly. The correlation between mistakes and strategic junctures, however, provides an opportunity for counterinsurgents to anticipate the possibility for errors by the various organizations.

Early Mistakes

Imprudent early armed actions fit within this stage, as occurred when insurgencies such as the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the Egyptian radical Islamists miscalculated the government's reaction to their initial acts. Some insurgencies opt to attempt to shorten the conflict and take advantage of perceived government weakness by launching a high stakes offensive. These often take the form of major offensives initiated at the outset of an insurgency, such as the FMLN's 1981 offensive. Many of these offensives overestimate both the government's weakness and the insurgency's strength.

Growth Mistakes

Insurgencies that experience initial success in building their movements and expanding their control are susceptible to mistakes rooted in hubris and failure to deepen popular support. Often, as an insurgency grows and insurgents begin to establish a level of localized control or influence, they attempt to impose their ideology and coerce support from the citizenry, in the process overplaying their hand through zealotry and terror. In a number of situations they attempt to sustain terror campaigns within the community they are attempting to proselytize. Insurgencies, including Peru's Shining Path, the GIA in Algeria, and PFLOAG in Oman, eroded their initial popular support through errors committed during their growth phase.

Movements often attempt to alter the attitude of the international community or an external power by exporting terror during the growth or strategic plateau phase. The GIA and the Chechens executed their attacks on France and Russia, respectively, during these stages.[44]

The mistake of overreliance on state-provided external support is often initially manifested in the growth stage, although it may appear in latter stages. Setbacks to the Kurdish insurgents in Iraq and the Thai Communists generated by the withdrawal of support from Iran, and Vietnam and China, respectively, came in the growth phase of those insurgencies. The withdrawal of Yugoslavian support to the KKE in Greece came as the movement was in its strategic plateau stage. The withdrawal of vital support at the moment the KKE decided to adopt a conventional orientation and defensive strategy compounded those errors and contributed to the movement's defeat.[45]

Strategic Plateau Mistakes

If an insurgency retains and expands local control during the strategic plateau phase, it is prone to errors that can create a backlash, as described in the growth stage. An insurgency may be tempted during this period to try to maximize government decline or reverse their own waning fortunes. As strategist Colin Gray noted:

> If an irregular force enjoys military success, its leaders are always vulnerable to the temptation to change the rules. They may seek to accelerate the pace of history by going directly for political gold by means of a swift military victory. As often as not, such hubris brings them close to military and political nemesis.[46]

Among the acts of hubris may be the decision to launch a high stakes offensive or to hold territory, especially if an insurgency has declared the establishment of a government or state. The Salvadoran FMLN's 1989 "final offensive" and the PFLOAG's attack on Mirbat both came as their fortunes began to ebb amidst a strategic plateau phase.[47] Similarly, the Greek KKE and the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam opted to hold ground to protect virtual states although the "slope" of the conflict plateau had begun to favor the government.[48] The KKE, UNITA, and the Huks opted to adopt a conventional orientation, decisions that ultimately contributed to their defeat.

An insurgency may seek to alter its fortunes during a strategic plateau by boosting its resources through criminal activities. Both the FARC and UNITA saw illegal proceeds as a means of enhancing their military capabilities and decisively increasing the organization's size and power.

Late or Resolution Mistakes

In this stage, as in prior stages, insurgent success invites overreach and miscalculation. As such, most of the errors outlined in the previous

> *An insurgency is a risky and highly complex human activity susceptible to a range of mistakes by its protagonists.*

stages are manifested during the resolution stage. When insurgents perceive themselves as nearing victory, they become vulnerable to crippling security lapses, as was the case with the Shining Path.[49]

Insurgencies that lose popular support or whose fortunes are waning often turn to terror in an attempt to regenerate support and tolerance. Often in such cases, as happened with the PFLOAG in Oman and Darul Islam in Indonesia, the use of terror had the opposite effect, accelerating insurgent decline.[50]

Insurgent Mistakes in Iraq

The Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq, especially the part played by al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), illustrates the incidence and timing of strategic mistakes by insurgents and their criticality in reversing the group's fortunes. (AQI was first known as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad and later formed the cornerstone of the Islamic State of Iraq; in this article it will be referred to as AQI.)

Holding Territory

In November 2004, Sunni Arab insurgents, including foreign-led jihadists, opted to defend Al Fallujah against an assault by Coalition forces. The decision came during a period of rapid growth and influence for the insurgents. It is estimated that contesting Al Fallujah cost the insurgents some 2,000 dead, wounded, or captured.[51] The insurgents lost control of a highly symbolic citadel and important internal sanctuary, a loss that damaged insurgent morale.[52] Although the defeat was not a strategic reversal for the Sunni Arab insurgency, it generated criticism from within regarding the decisionmaking of various leaders and the tactics employed. It was also responsible for creating a degree of disunity among the insurgents.[53]

Retired Major General Robert Scales has asserted that AQI repeated its mistake in 2007 by declaring Baquba the capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and then attempting to defend it against Coalition forces.[54] In retrospect, the AQI decision to hold Baquba came as insurgent fortunes were clearly in decline. AQI's loss of control of the city left the group "fractured, relatively leaderless, stripped of concealment and popular force."[55]

Exporting Terror

In November 2005, near the height of its power and influence, AQI opted to conduct a terrorist attack in Jordan. The attack was designed to target western interests. Most of the 100 victims, however, were local Muslims. Rather than neutralizing a point from which "war on Islam" was conducted, as Mark Cancian termed it, the attacks turned the Jordanians decisively against AQI and al Qaeda, in general.[56]

Zealotry and Dysfunctional Terror

AQI's zealotry and terror developed concurrently and appear as of this writing to have dealt a crippling blow to the movement. Both mistakes emerged during the movement's growth phase. The first evidence of zealotry by jihadist fighters and the resulting conflict with nationalist insurgents was seen in 2004 in Al Fallujah, where the insurgents had gained control of the city.[57] In those locations where the insurgents gained influence over the citizenry, they imposed a strict form of sharia that conflicted with the Islamic customs of Iraqi Sunni Arabs.[58] Local Iraqis, many of them aligned with the wider Sunni insurgency, were alienated by AQI's ideology and practices, which they termed non-Islamic, inhumane, and resembling Taliban behavior in Afghanistan.[59] AQI not only used terror to enforce its version of Islam but also to coerce popular tolerance and diminish support for the government. Frequently, the target of AQI's terror was Sunni Arabs.[60]

AQI's zealotry and its misapplication of terror were acutely demonstrated by the decision to declare the formation of an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). According to the spokesman for the rival Islamic Army of Iraq, "After Al Qa'ida . . . announced that it had transformed into a state . . . they started to target all those whose opinion differed from theirs. The tribes were provoked."[61] Analyst Lydia Khalil, writing in *Terrorism Focus*, has labeled the formation of the ISI as al Qaeda's "biggest strategic blunder in Iraq." According to Khalil, "This move . . . fueled resentment towards [AQI] by indigenous Iraqi insurgent groups and accelerated anti-AQI sentiment."[62]

Faced with mounting resistance from within its support base, AQI attempted to reestablish popular support by conducting a terror campaign, a common late stage mistake for a fading insurgency. As with other terror campaigns, AQI's actions only deepened popular resistance to the group.[63] The backlash against AQI was manifested in the Anbar Awakening, a tribally driven movement (backed by nationalist insurgents) that essentially forced AQI out of Al Anbar.[64]

While AQI's missteps were key in establishing the conditions for its strategic reversal, Coalition forces support for the tribal uprising served as an equally important ingredient in the group's degradation. AQI's brutality forced Sunni Arabs into discussions with American and Iraqi officials.[65] Coalition forces quickly reacted to the evolving situation and created a security shield, provided resources, and partnered with the local tribes to eject AQI.[66] In six months, Al Anbar province went from having the worst security in Iraq to being among the most secure locations.[67]

Research and Doctrinal Inclusion

This preliminary examination raises numerous avenues for further research to enhance the understanding of insurgent errors and enable exploitation, including:

- Conducting case study analysis to identify additional strategic mistakes and gain further insight into the relationship between insurgency lifecycle stages and strategic mistakes.
- Analyzing successful insurgencies to determine if they make the same errors as defeated insurgencies or whether they avoid specific mistakes. Such analyses might reveal mistakes previously unrecognized and that were not leveraged by counterinsurgency forces. Such an understanding will be a marked advantage in developing counterinsurgency strategies.
- Conducting case study analysis to determine if certain types of insurgencies are more prone than others to particular strategic mistakes.
- Developing a companion case-based analysis of successful exploitation of insurgent mistakes in an effort to provide counterinsurgents with tactics and strategies for the exploitation of insurgent errors.
- Conducting research into how counterinsurgents force insurgent strategic junctures and trigger insurgent mistakes.

Although insurgent strategic mistakes represent one of the best opportunities for counterinsurgents to mitigate an insurgent threat, recognition of their existence receives scant attention in US counterinsurgency doctrine. For example, Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, acknowledges that insurgents may misapply their approach, providing opportunities for counterinsurgency exploitation. But it does not discuss what those misapplications may be or when they might occur.[68]

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide specific suggestions for doctrinal revision, consideration should be given to incorporating the existence of insurgent mistakes and the catalytic role of strategic junctures in future updates to Field Manual 3-24, Joint Publication 3-24, and related publications. As further research yields additional insight into

the timing and nature of insurgent mistakes, the concept should be incorporated into counterinsurgency intelligence preparation of the battlefield procedures. The US Army's deepening institutionalization of Red Teams—staff elements which "support decisionmaking during planning and operations by identifying potential weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and unseen opportunities"—could provide an ideal vehicle to operationalize the concept of insurgent mistakes.[69] Because leveraging insurgent mistakes often involves other national resources and strengths, the concept of insurgent mistakes should be incorporated into crafting an interagency doctrine for counterinsurgency operations, represented in the State Department's January 2009 *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*.

Conclusion

Sir Robert Thompson asserted in his seminal *Defeating Communist Insurgency* that "there are no short-cuts and no gimmicks" in countering an insurgent challenge.[70] Recognizing and then leveraging insurgent strategic mistakes should not be viewed as a short-cut or gimmick, but rather it is part of the "thinking man's war" that is counterinsurgency. This article has sought to assist the counterinsurgent strategist by elucidating the criticality, nature, and timing of insurgent strategic mistakes. Beyond the basic concepts introduced, additional research, combined with including the concept of insurgent mistakes in evolving counterinsurgency doctrine, will enhance the counterinsurgent's ability to take advantage of insurgent mistakes while "playing for the breaks."

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